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ABSTRACT

A teacher educator incorporates active involvement of students and choice in two different college classrooms. The first class was an undergraduate reading/literacy education class. Students were offered the choice of the RAP (Reading Addiction Process) option or taking the final exam. Students read materials of their own choice on a daily basis. Requiring daily reading was intended to help form habits in a way that infrequent or irregular practice would not. At the end of the semester, students wrote a brief reflective paper in which they considered their growth as readers. In a graduate-level course intended to acquaint students with findings and trends in recent reading research, groups of four or five students were responsible for designing and carrying out a modest piece of research. Allowing each group to choose its own research question contributed to the active involvement that characterized the research projects. The element of choice in these courses made a difference for many teachers and prospective teachers. It seems to have been particularly effective in fostering self-confidence and developing new habits. (RS)

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"Offering Choice in Teacher Education"

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ABSTRACT

Offering Choice in Teacher Education

This paper recognizes the importance of student choice in teacher education. Specifically, two projects involving student choice are described. The first is taken from an undergraduate course for preservice elementary teachers. Students have the option of pursuing a daily program of free reading as a means of developing reading habits. The second project is from a graduate course for reading specialists. Here students select research topics and follow through by designing and carrying out a modest research study.

Offering Choice in Teacher Education

Over the years, educators have come to realize that actively involving students in their learning can be very effective. An elementary school student who produces a report about another country often gains more than one who simply reads an assigned selection about that country. A high school student may not fully understand a textbook's explanation of a vacuum condition until he or she has worked through the principles in a lab activity. This active involvement is enhanced when the student is allowed and encouraged to make choices within an assignment.

As a teacher trainer, I have advocated active involvement and choice for many years. More recently I have attempted to model this advice within my own college classroom. The following sections will describe two different classes in which choice has been consciously included as an important element.

RAP OPTION

The first class was an undergraduate reading/literacy education class. Typically students in this class had been sincere about becoming the best elementary teacher that they could. They diligently read the textbook, actively

participated in class and enthusiastically worked through field assignments. Yet one element bothered me about their preparation. While they knew that modeling was an important element is a teacher's repertoire, many did not read for their own personal pleasure and satisfaction and could not be expected to authentically model this behavior for their students.

How could I develop a habit for recreational reading among students who had grown up in a society dominated by TV, video and film where reading only meant dutifully reading assigned textbooks? I realized the futility of trying to mandate changes in habits and attitudes through the form of a required assignment. Rather, the students were offered an alternative called the RAP option. Specifically, at the start of the semester, individuals had the choice of selecting the RAP option or taking the final exam.

RAP stands for Reading Addiction Process. While used in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion, the term does help to convey the objective of the activity. When RAP was introduced to the class, they discussed their associations with the concept of addiction. Addictions to chemicals and nicotine were widely seen as unhealthy, dangerous and often illegal. As the discussion came around to the common element

of an uncontrollable urge, students began to understand the implications of RAP.

I explained that those who selected RAP would read materials of their own choice on a daily basis. They would read for at least thirty minutes, preferably longer. Requiring **daily** reading (with reasonable exceptions for illness, mid-term cramming, etc.) was intended to help form habits in a way that infrequent or irregular practice would not.

Invariably students would ask "What can we read/" The answer would go back to the purpose for RAP--to develop teachers who choose to read for their own satisfaction. Choiceful readers make their own selections, and so it should be here. However, there were some readings that were considered "off limits." Readings that were part of any course assignment didn't count for their RAP reading since these would have been previously required and offered little or no choice.

While the students chose their own reading materials, I did encourage them to explore new directions. In any college class, there are some avid readers and several indifferent readers. All readers could grow within the RAP option if

they made an effort to read things that they didn't ordinarily read. In some cases, such reading would confirm a previous suspicion that they really didn't like to read in that area. However, all students discovered an enthusiasm for some topics and sources that they had never known before.

For students who had done very little selection of their own reading material in the past, simply locating materials became a challenge for them. I gave them a list of sources and we brainstormed about this in class. Examples of sources were the college library, the public library, bookstores, and friends' personal libraries. While most were aware of the college library, only a few were specific enough to suggest the periodical room where general interest magazines, professional journals and newspapers from around the world could be found. Still fewer students were aware of New Acquisitions, a section of shelves near the circulation desk that held an ever-changing collection of brand new books that had not yet been signed out for the first time. The books represented a cross-section of disciplines. I pointed out that, in many cases with nonfiction books, a chapter or two could be read as an informative and satisfying experience without need to read the book from cover to cover. At first, some thought this would be "cheating" and only later did they realize the important lesson that everything does not have to

be read in the same way. In the words of Francis Bacon, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

Periodically throughout the semester, those who chose the RAP option shared their experiences in class. It was helpful to hear that others also had difficulty finding as much as a half hour in a busy day for personal reading. At the same time, most students eventually found a "best time" that worked for them. They also shared ideas for reading as well as actual materials. At times like these, I would highlight new sources and topics, recognize those who had made a breakthrough in developing the reading habit, and encourage risk-taking among those who were timid about trying new materials or topics.

At the end of the semester, students wrote a brief reflective paper in which they considered their growth as a reader. How were they reading differently? Had their habits and attitudes changed? The value of the RAP option can be best understood through the students' own words. The following are excerpts from two different end-of-term papers.

> Heide - Wow, when I look back at all the different books, magazines, and newspaper articles which I have

read over the last few months, I am truly amazed. There is such a wide variety of topics which I have read ranging from health articles to horror stories. This activity has definitely been beneficial for me because it has helped me broaden my horizons with regard to reading material. I now have a better idea of what does and does not interest me. For example, I found out that I really enjoyed the health related books such as the Yoga book and the health articles. Keepers of the Earth was another favorite of mine. This was a book of folk tales from the Native Americans. I guess I'm beginning to see that different cultures and their ways of life are of real interest to me. On the other hand, there were some articles and books which were quite boring for me. I'm still not sure what I read in the business section of the newspaper or what I was reading about in the Marxist Anthropology book, Yet this is okay because I am now able to make better reading selections for the future.

David - I made a point of picking up the Sunday edition of an out-of-town newspaper every Monday. I found this an enjoyable and worthwhile endeavor which I expect to continue. I came to realize that we can tend to get too complacent and, as a result, provincial, from too steady

a diet of local newspapers. I found it interesting to read news with differing slants and angles. Of particular interest were the op-ed pages. I grew particularly fond of the Baltimore Sun and the Miami Herald.

From my local public library, I signed out a myriad of magazines every week. I perused some which are published for a narrow and specific segment of the population such as Birder's World, Stamps, and Model Railroader to explore unfamiliar territory. I signed out some women's magazines to try and understand their appeal. I looked at Mademoiselle, Vogue, Working Woman, and Ms., the latter two containing substance, the former two predominantly advertising. I also discovered some magazines which I had been only vaguely familiar with that I truly enjoyed reading. Among them were Atlantic, Harper's, American Heritage, and Utne Reader. As a result, I now count Utne Reader as one on the publications to which I subscribe. I really found myself captivated with this magazine and the way they publish thematic issues with sources culled from myriad alternative publications.

EMERGENT RESEARCH

In the graduate program for the reading specialist, the first advanced level course is Current Reading Research. As the title implies, this course is intended to acquaint students with findings and trends in more recent research. But its goals go beyond that. Students are expected to learn the nature of research, types of research, and research design. By the end of their degree program, the students will design, implement and analyze their own research which will be reported in the form of a thesis. Part of their preparation for all of this involves extensive critical reading of published research reports. However, reading alone would not provide sufficient preparation. Again active participation with a strong element of student choice was called for.

After the first four weeks of the semester, when the class had begun to develop a sense of the nature of research, I divided the class into groups of four or five. Each group was then responsible to design and carry out a modest piece of research, orally reporting the results to the class at the end of the semester.

At first the students were hesitant about taking on such a project, but they were buoyed by the mutual support from

their group members. I made it clear that much learning takes place through successive attempts, and this was the very first attempt for all of them--thus the term "emergent research." They were not expected to produce the perfect research study, but their initial experiences would help them to get closer to that ideal in the future.

Their apprehension was reduced further by the knowledge that they were working in a group with their peers, and no one individual had to do it all for this first effort. The students in each group usually shared a common teaching experience, either as teachers of the same grade level or the same content area.

The first few sessions were spent in brainstorming research topics and questions, and an initial search of related literature was soon begun. Some groups chose to work from a classic cooperative learning model while others found they were more comfortable without specific task designations. In any case, the degree of participation and enthusiasm was very high, and students soon forgot their initial apprehensions.

Allowing each group to choose its own research question contributed to the active involvement that characterized this project. Some of the questions that have been selected

include:

* Are their differences between elementary and secondary teachers' beliefs about factors contributing to reading difficulty?
* Do employers prefer job applicants who have a high school diploma or those who have a GED?
* What do 7 and 8-year-olds look for when selecting a library book?
* Is there a significant correlation between attitudes toward writing and writing achievement among middle grade students?
* What are the variations in methods of implementing elementary blended classrooms?

Toward the end of the semester, each group orally reported its findings to the class. More important than the findings was the explanation of the process that was used to identify research questions and develop a methodology. Another key element of their report was a reflection of what they might have done differently as a result of their experiences.

Again, the results of this project can be best summarized in the words of one of the students. "I learned

an incredible amount from the Emergent Research project. I came into this class without a clue about doing research. And now I feel confident enough to begin planning my own thesis."

The element of choice in these courses has made a difference for many teachers and prospective teachers. It seems to have been particularly effective in fostering self-confidence and developing new habits. In my own teaching, I feel that the activities described here are just the tip of the iceberg, and I plan to actively explore this approach in the future.